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FLEXIBLE MICROCHANNEL HEAT EXCHANGER

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

1 A field of the invention is heating and cooling. An additional field
2 of the invention is mesoscopic devices.

3 BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

4 Small scale active heating and cooling devices hold tremendous
5 potential. Potential uses are limited only by the decision as to whether a device,
6 process, or application would benefit from active heating or cooling.
7 Implementation of networked, low-power mesoscopic devices offers obvious
8 advantages compared to traditional active heating and cooling. Practical issues
9 remain in the way of widespread implementation and use of such devices,
10 however. In addition to active heating and cooling devices, e.g., heat pumps, there
11 are additional examples of mesoscale systems that hold promise for a wide range
12 of practical applications. Examples of such mesoscale systems include
13 combustors and evaporators, heat exchangers, and chemical and biological
14 systems.

15 Mesoscale devices such as these can be defined as ones where the
16 critical physical length scale is on the same order as the governing
17 phenomenological length scale, or ones with critical dimensions that span the
18 microscale to the normal scale ($\text{mm} < \text{length scale} < \text{cm}$). These large differences
19 in scale pose several challenges in manufacturing. Mesoscopic heat exchangers

1 are needed for a number of applications requiring high heat flux ($> 1000 \text{ w/m}^2$)
2 across thin cross-sections, without incurring excessive pressure losses due to fluid
3 flow in small channels. Enhancement in heat transfer occurs when the effective
4 cross-sectional thickness of a mesoscale heat exchanger matches the thickness
5 over which heat is transferred to the working fluids.

6 Exemplary potential practical uses of heat exchangers include laptop
7 computer cooling, car seat heating and cooling, airfoil skin heat exchangers,
8 micro-chemical reactors, and compact heat exchangers among others. Another
9 exemplary practical application is the temperature control of clothing. While time
10 is likely to bring the technology to clothing in general, a likely initial application is
11 to chemical and biological warfare protective suits for military personnel operating
12 in extremely hazardous environments. Integrated mesoscopic cooler circuits
13 (IMCC) have been developed by some of the present inventors, and are described,
14 for example in Beebe et al., U.S. Patent 6,148,635, which is incorporated by
15 reference herein. Also see, Shannon, et al., "Integrated Mesoscopic Cooler
16 Circuits (IMCCs)." Proceedings of the ASME, Advanced Energy System Division
17 39, Symposium on Miniature and Mesoscopic Energy Conversion Devices (1999),
18 p. 75-82.

19 Others have endeavored to design, fabricate, and mass-produce
20 microchannel (below about 1mm diameter) heat exchangers for microelectronics
21 cooling and the refrigeration industry. See, P.M. Martin et al, "Microchannel Heat
22 Exchangers for Advanced Climate Control," Proceedings of the SPIE 2639,
23 (1995), p. 82-88. Delphi Automotive Systems and Modine Manufacturing
24 Company have produced some commercially available mesoscopic heat
25 exchangers made from extruded metals, such as aluminum. Such exchangers are
26 capable of holding high internal pressures and can support large heat fluxes, but
27 typically measure between 0.5 to 1 mm thick, and are not flexible after forming.

28 Microfabricated thin-film heat exchangers with microchannels 1 mm
29 wide x 30 mm high, made from photosensitive polyimide layers have been

1 and heat exchange. A layered structure with channels aligned in multiple
2 orientations in the layers permits the use of a flexible material without channel
3 sagging and provides for uniform fluid flows. In a preferred embodiment, layers
4 are heat sealed, e.g., by a preferred lamination fabrication process.

5 BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

6 FIG. 1 is an exploded schematic view of a preferred embodiment
7 mesoscopic heat exchanger;

8 FIG. 2 is a schematic assembled view of the preferred embodiment
9 mesoscopic heat exchanger;

10 FIG. 3 is a block diagram illustrating a preferred fabrication process
11 for a mesoscopic heat exchanger; and

12 FIG. 4 shows the time, temperature, and applied pressure profile
13 found to optimally bond layers in a laboratory conditions and style fabrication of a
14 mesoscopic heat exchanger.

15

16 DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

17 The invention concerns a mesoscopic multilayer structure with
18 internal microchannels. The entire structure is flexible. A layered structure with
19 channels aligned in multiple orientations in the layers permits the use of a flexible
20 material without channel sagging. Flows are through separate manifold and
21 channel layers. A fabrication method of the invention includes single layer
22 patterning and multilayer lamination. Heat bonding avoids solvent bonding.

23 Referring now to FIG. 1, a preferred embodiment heat exchanger
24 includes layers 22a, 22b, 22c and 22d. Each of these layers is formed of flexible
25 heat-sealable polyimide. Layers 22b and 22c include uniformly dimensioned (in
26 width and height) microchannels 24. From device to device, dimensions of the
27 channels may be selected to meet a particular performance parameters, but within
28 each individual device, microchannels are highly uniform in width and height.

1 Refrigerant or other fluid enters through an inlet hole 26 the device interface in
2 layer 22d. The device interface layer 22d interfaces with another device that
3 includes means for promoting flow of liquid through the heat exchanger. Layer
4 22c acts as a header, i.e., a layer for even distribution of refrigerant or heating
5 fluid for heat transfer into the channel layer 22b. Heat transfer is with the cap
6 layer 22a that seals in refrigerant by closing the top of channels 24 in the channel
7 layer 22b and forms an outside surface of the heat exchanger. An opposite side of
8 the header layer reaccepts refrigerant after heat transfer and creates a uniform flow
9 back into an exit hole 28 of the device interface layer 22d.

10 The microchannels 24 in alternate layers, e.g., layers 22b and 22c are
11 oriented differently to provide channel floors (the individual layers 22b and 22c
12 only define, by themselves, channel walls), and add a structural integrity that
13 avoids sagging of thin-walled and thin-floored microchannels in the completed
14 assembly. In addition, the lengths of individual microchannels are patterned in a
15 manner to establish uniform flows. In the preferred FIGs. 1 and 2 embodiment,
16 for example, microchannels in layer 22b have different lengths that establish a
17 shape. The center channels are gradually shorter to give the channels in the layer
18 an overall hourglass like configuration. The waist 31 of the hourglass shape
19 avoids channels over ports 30 in the layer 22c that communicate refrigerant into its
20 channels from the inlet hole 26 and out from its channels into the outlet hole 28.
21 In intersection areas 32 (see FIG. 2) where channels from the layers 22b and 22c
22 overlap, and the different orientation provides rigidity that avoids channel sag
23 under pressured conditions. Only a few of the many intersections 32 in FIG. 2 are
24 labeled with reference numerals to keep the figure clear. Referring to FIG. 2, the
25 shape also establishes the desirable uniform flows into channels. Uniform flows
26 into and out of the exchanger avoid pockets of pressure build-up that can be
27 destructive to the heat exchanger.

28 When manifold input area from ports 30 to each channel in the layer
29 22b is varied, with channels closest to the ports 30 having a minimum area and

1 channels farthest from the ports 30 having a maximum area, refrigerant flow is
2 optimized. The general star-burst manifold shape surrounding ports 30 is, along
3 with the hourglass configuration in the channel layer 22b, therefore preferred to
4 provide uniform flows. A set 36 of microchannels in the channel layer 22b furthest
5 from the ports 30 intersects all of the microchannels in the header layer 22c,
6 whereas the number of header microchannels intersected by microchannels in the
7 channel layer 22b gradually decreases (by sets in the preferred channel layer 22b)
8 with a set 38 of microchannels closest to the ports intersecting the fewest number
9 of microchannels in the header layer 22c. The number of cross-over intersections
10 32 between the channels in header layer 22c and channel layer 22b controls the
11 input area afforded each flow into a set of the microchannels in the channel layer
12 22b.

13 An additional point about the shaping is that the patterns make use
14 of separate header flow layer 22c to enable fabrication by a lamination process.
15 From a fabrication standpoint, the lamination process can only be utilized if each
16 individually patterned layer represents a contiguous whole, with no independent or
17 isolated solid geometries. Overlapping of geometrical material voids patterned in
18 the individual layers during the lamination process creates a manufacturable
19 internal geometry and defines channels when the individual layers 22b and 22c
20 have a piano-wire style cut all the way through to define channel walls. This is
21 achieved by the separate header 22c and channel 22b layers, resulting in three-
22 dimensional, rather than two-dimensional, refrigerant flow paths.

23 In accordance with the preferred embodiment, layers 22a, 22b, 22c
24 and 22d are formed from heat-sealable polyimide films. Lamination of a
25 multilayer structure of mechanically patterned polyimide heat-sealable films was
26 found to provide the most versatile fabrication process. It is critical to use heat
27 sealed films, as contrasted with solvent bonded films. Exemplary heat-sealable
28 polyimide films preferred for the invention are the Kapton® KJ and EKJ (DuPont)
29 films. Other examples are Teflon® coated Kapton® FN heat-sealable films. Other

1 heat-sealable polyimide films, including those to be developed, will also be
 2 suitable. In contrast to Teflonâ coated Kaptonâ FN heat-sealable films, Kaptonâ
 3 KJ and EKJ (DuPont) are thermoplastic all-polyimide films designed as adhesive
 4 bonding sheets for high performance applications. The difference between KJ and
 5 EKJ films is the inclusion of a Kaptonâ E polyimide layer as the core of an EKJ
 6 film to enhance its mechanical properties. The enhanced properties are preferred.

7 The EKJ films for the cap 22a and inlet/outlet 22d layers prevented,
 8 due to their higher modulus and glass transition temperature, sagging of the
 9 spanning membrane sections of the microchannels and manifolds during the
 10 lamination cycle. Omission of the EKJ layers in attempts to use KJ for all four
 11 layers resulted in solid laminates with no internal geometry because of
 12 thermoplastic flow during the bonding process. Accordingly, heat sealable
 13 polyimide layers used for the outer layers must have a sufficiently high modulus
 14 and glass transition temperature to maintain solidity during the lamination process.
 15 Table 1 highlights a few selected properties of the preferred materials:

16 TABLE 1

	KJ	EKJ
Glass Transition Temperature	220°C	220°C KJ >340°C E core
Tensile Strength	20 ksi	30 ksi
Modulus	400 ksi	700 ksi
Elongation	150%	70%
CTE	60 ppm/°C	25 ppm/°C

Moisture Content	1.0%	2.0%
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1 Channel and manifold heights are easily controlled by layer
2 thickness. With single channel layer construction, microchannel heights of
3 roughly 70 mm were achieved in experimental prototypes according to the FIGs.1
4 and 2 embodiment.

5 Referring now to FIG. 3, a block diagram illustrates the general steps
6 for a preferred fabrication method of the invention. Heat-sealable polyimide
7 sheets are cut to size (step 34). Mechanical patterning of the layers is conducted
8 (step 36). A preferred technique is computer controlled knife cutting for the
9 mechanical patterning. In practice, there are likely four process flows, one for
10 each of the four layers 22a, 22b, 22c, 22d. Subsequent to patterning, the layers
11 undergo bond preparation (step 38), e.g., solvent degreasing and a dehydration
12 bake. Layers are aligned (step 40) and laminated (step 42) by a heat treatment,
13 such as a vacuum hot press.

14 In a preferred technique for the mechanical patterning of step 36
15 used to form experimental prototype heat exchanges, layers were patterned using
16 computer controlled knife cutting. In prototypes constructed according to the
17 preferred FIGs. 1 and 2 embodiment, layers 22a and 22d were made from EKJ
18 (50mm thick) films, and layers 22b and 22c were made from KJ (75mm thick)
19 films. In practice of the invention, thicker films for layers 22b and 22c would be
20 preferred to allow deeper microfluidic channels.

21 To begin the preferred patterning process, sheets of KJ and EKJ are
22 sheet cut (step 34) into roughly 400 mm x 400 mm areas. The patterning used a
23 mounting (step 44) onto a carrier. In the experimental fabrication, paper-board
24 with an adhesive backing was used as a carrier for the polyimide films during the
25 patterning process. The depth of cut was set to approximately 80 mm so that the
26 blade does not penetrate the paper-board carrier, ensuring that sectioned film areas

1 remain attached to the carrier and do not project outward and interfere with the
2 traveling blade. After initial manual alignment, the sheet is positioned into the
3 grit-rolling cutting plotter (step 46) that automatically provides horizontal and
4 vertical justification. Cutting proceeds according to a 3 dimensional modeling
5 (step 48). A three-dimensional solid model controls the cutting process (step 50).
6 The carrier is removed after cutting (step 52). With the use of a paper carrier, the
7 carrier board may be removed, for example, by soaking in an acetone bath for a
8 time to permit the acetone to diffuse through the paper board to the
9 adhesive/polyimide interface, dissolving the adhesive backing. The patterned
10 polyimide films “lift-off” the paper board. No peeling or stretching of the films is
11 required for removing the carrier substrate, precluding any unwarranted straining
12 of the individual layers and patterns.

13 The completed cutting process contaminates the polyimide layers.
14 The bond preparation step 38 prepares the layers for lamination. Contaminated
15 layers may not bond properly. A second acetone bath may be used for solvent
16 degreasing (step 54). During the degreasing (step 54), mechanical scrubbing (step
17 56) may be used, e.g., with polyester-fiber cloths, to remove residual adhesive as
18 well as other organic contaminants present on the film as received from the
19 factory. Layers are rinsed (step 58), e.g., with an isopropanol bath, and blown dry
20 (step 60), e.g., with nitrogen. After bond preparation, films should be handled with
21 sterile equipment or, if by operators, with operators wearing powder-free latex or
22 nitrile gloves. Surface cleanliness tends to dominate the mechanical and chemical
23 strength of interlaminar bonds.

24 Test fabrications of prototype heat exchangers revealed that KJ and
25 EKJ films, like most all polyimides, demonstrated a propensity to absorb water in
26 ambient temperature and humidity environments. During the high-temperature
27 lamination process, absorbed water volatilized, aggregated, and formed voids at the
28 layer interfaces, making it extremely difficult to bond large areas. Void formation
29 is avoided by a vacuum dehydration bake (step 62) prior to lamination. In

1 experiments, a 12 hour bake at a temperature of 150°C and an ambient pressure of
2 0.1KPa was used. The dehydration bake time and temperature schedule was not
3 optimized, and thus shorter process times are thought to be possible. Much shorter
4 times should be realized in a scaled up manufacturing process where the
5 manufacturing environment and equipment conditions are controlled to avoid
6 water absorption.

7 After cleaning and dehydration, patterned layers are ready for
8 alignment and lamination. In separate experiments, it was discovered that KJ and
9 EKJ films adhere to many metal surfaces during pressurized heat-sealing in a hot
10 press. Lamination therefore makes use of a platen separator. A high-temperature
11 separator material is necessary to prevent the outside layers, e.g., layers 22a and
12 22d in FIG. 1, from bonding to the platens of the hot press. Duofoilâ (JJA, Inc.)
13 was found suitable for use as a separator plate. Kapton KJ and EKJ films did not
14 permanently adhere to Duofoilâ after exposure to 300°C and 1.4MPa pressure.
15 The platen separator should be cleaned (step 68) to avoid contamination of the
16 polyimide. In experiments, the Duofoilâ platen separator was cleaned with
17 isopropanol. Placement of the polyimide layers on the platen separator (step 70)
18 should be conducted with sufficient heat to avoid condensation on the layers. In
19 experiments, an initial alignment of polyimide layers on Duofoilâ sheets
20 positioned on a flat hotplate at a constant temperature of 50-55°C staved off
21 condensation. The process is completed with placement of a second platen
22 separator on top of the stack. Lamination is then conducted in a vacuum hot
23 process.

24 In experiments, a second Duofoilâ plate was positioned on the four
25 aligned polyimide layers, and the entire stack was sandwiched between two 160
26 mm x 160 mm square aluminum plates, 25 mm thick. The aluminum block was
27 then positioned on center in a modified Carver vacuum hot press at a standby
28 temperature of 200°C. FIG. 4 shows the time, temperature, and applied pressure
29 profile found to optimally bond the layers together. A pressure of 0.1 KPa was

1 achieved in the press chamber and the press temperature was ramped to 300°C at a
2 rate of 2°C/min. Once 300°C was reached, the hydraulic jack was used to apply a
3 pressure of approximately 1 MPa for 25 minutes. Some pressure relaxation occurs
4 during lamination, and no controls were initiated to maintain a constant load.
5 After the 25 minutes had elapsed, the load was disengaged and the aluminum
6 block was removed.

7 A cooling of the laminated heat compressor (step 72) preferably
8 includes an inversion of the structure after removal from the vacuum process. In
9 the experiments, the aluminum blocks were removed, flipped over, placed on a flat
10 cast iron base, and allowed to cool to room temperature over a period of two
11 hours. Rotation of the blocks switched the orientation of the films contained
12 within the stack, thus reversing any previously acquired sagging in the header and
13 channel layers during the initial phase of the cool-down process. The block cools
14 via conduction to the cast iron base or by natural convection to the surrounding
15 air. As such, the aluminum blocks provided the thermal mass which self-
16 controlled the cooling process.

17 Several different uniformly bonded (no interlaminar voids or
18 bubbles), functional 100 mm x 100 mm footprint, prototype heat exchangers
19 according to the FIGs. 1 and 2 embodiment were fabricated. The description of
20 prototypes is included here only as an example, and the invention is not limited to
21 the materials, dimensions or geometry of the prototypes. Empirical studies of each
22 implemented design iteration yielded various critical fabrication parameters.
23 During the lamination process, excessive thermoplastic flow of material in layers
24 adjacent (above or below) to a local internal geometry can easily occlude both
25 channels and manifolds which have micron scaled dimensions. Therefore, the
26 most critical design parameter underlying the four-layer lamination methodology
27 for creation of internal geometries was a material dependent, maximum allowable
28 membrane span. For EKJ films, membrane spans up to 2 mm are allowed because
29 of the presence of a stiff Kapton® E core with a higher apparent glass transition

1 temperature. The maximum membrane span of KJ films are considerably less,
2 probably closer to 500 mm.

3 In the fabrication of experimental prototypes, channel dimensions
4 were targeted at 75 mm high x 800 mm wide. However, some compression of
5 these dimensions was noticed subsequent to lamination, resulting in approximate
6 channel dimensions of 70 mm x 750 mm. Over numerous cross-sections, no
7 discernable interface existed between the internal KJ layers (2 & 3) after bonding,
8 direct evidence of diffuse, thermoplastic polymer welding. Moreover, plastic flow
9 of these layers was observed in the narrowing channel width, or widening of the
10 channel separators, towards the bottom of the channel. In qualitative strength
11 tests, KJ/KJ welded interfaces demonstrated the highest observed bond strengths.
12 However, because of the aforementioned sagging criterion, an all-KJ, four layer
13 proved unfeasible.

14 Accordingly, the sequencing of EKJ and KJ films within the
15 laminate mesoscopic heat exchanger is not an arbitrary design parameter. From
16 this, the invention should be carried out with outer layers having a modulus and
17 glass transition temperature to withstand lamination with thermoplastic flow and
18 inner layers that permit limited thermoplastic flow that maintains microchannel
19 shape during lamination. Channel dimensions can be selected depending on the
20 application. Thinner channels than those tested in the experimental prototypes can
21 be used if shorter channel lengths are employed, and vice versa. Moreover, the
22 span width can be adjusted with respect to the cap layer thickness to determine
23 how much sagging is desired. In fact, under pressure, the channel height
24 effectively becomes larger due to expansion of the cap layer, which permits a
25 higher flow rate. This phenomenon helps to self-regulate the pressure drop in the
26 channels and is a benefit of the invention.

27 The fabrication method of the invention, such as the preferred
28 method of FIG. 3, will lend itself into a mass production conducted, for example,
29 on a moving web machine. Each layer is a separate feed into the web, with a

1 cutting and patterning station to make its pattern. Conditions are maintained to
2 laminate the layers after patterning while moving on the moving web.

3 While specific embodiments of the present invention have been
4 shown and described, it should be understood that other modifications,
5 substitutions and alternatives are apparent to one of ordinary skill in the art. Such
6 modifications, substitutions and alternatives can be made without departing from
7 the spirit and scope of the invention, which should be determined from the
8 appended claims.

9 Various features of the invention are set forth in the appended
10 claims.